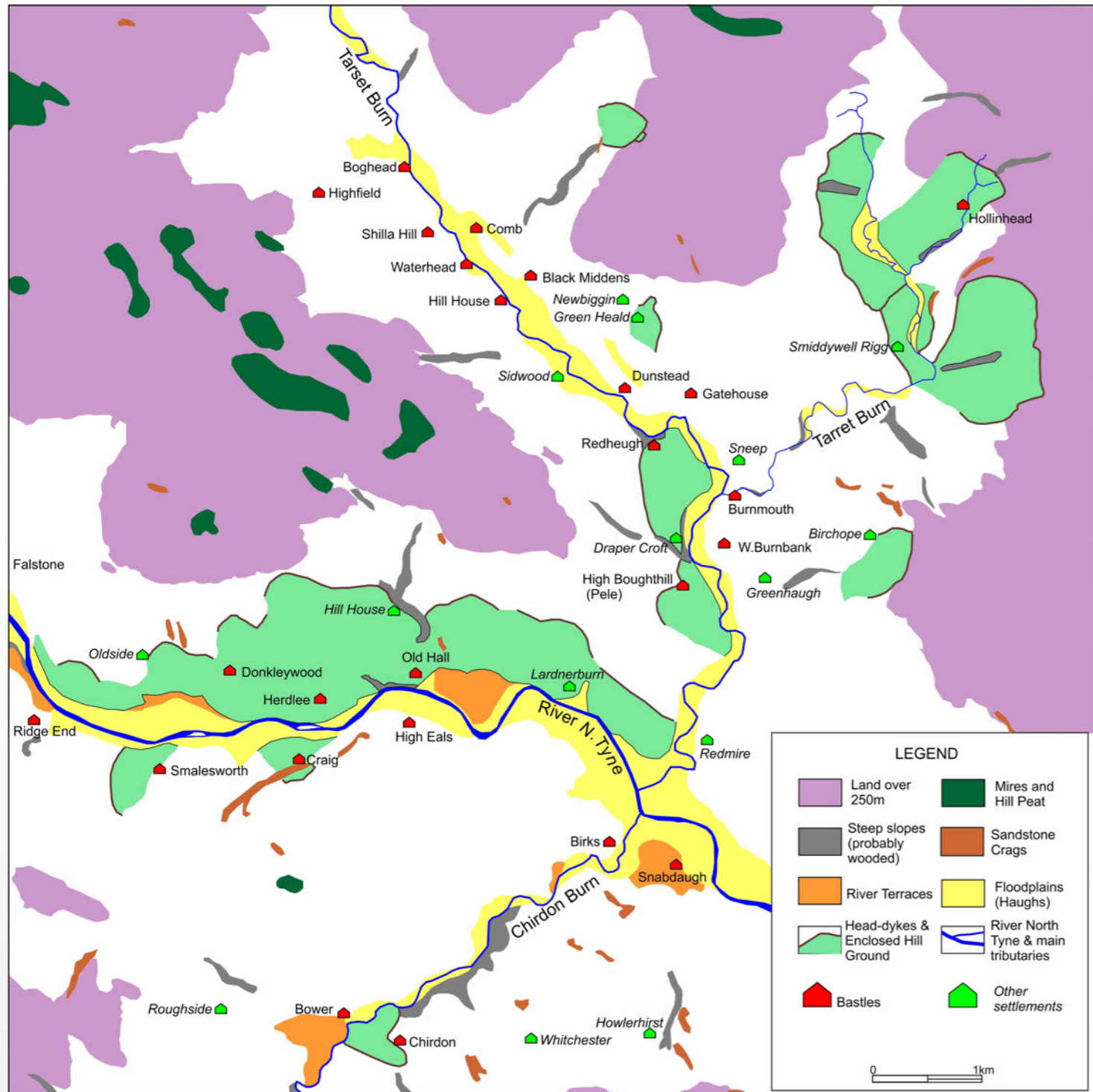


THE LANDSCAPE OF LARCENY

*From The Reivers: the story of the Border Reivers, Alistair Moffat, 2007



Topography based on OS Landplan Maps 1:10 000 scale. Crown © 2004. All rights reserved. Licence number 100043254. Some geological information from Geological Survey maps at various scales, published 1940-1980, amended by TAG 2009

Landscape changes

There have been many changes in the landscape in the last 450 years, including Parliamentary Enclosure, extensive drainage and afforestation, but it is still possible to recognise some of the natural features that were exploited for defence.

Contemporary description

In 1541, Sir Robert Bowes and Sir Ralph Ellerker, Commissioners to King Henry VIII, reported on the state of the Borders and described the siting and defence of the timber and turf houses.

The houses buildings and inhabitations of the said country of Tynedale is much set upon either side of the said River North Tyne and upon other little brooks and runnels running and descending into the said river in strong places by the nature of the ground and of such strengths naturally fortified as well by reason of mosses and marshes, which, with great difficulty, may be passed with horsemen as of banks and cloughs of wood wherein of old time for the more strength great trees have been felled and laid so athwart the ways passages that in divers places only it be by such as know & have experience of those said straight & level ways & passages, It will be hard for strangers having no knowledge thereof to pass by and especially upon horseback.

Experimental map

This map reconstructs some aspects of the 16th century terrain, based on a variety of sources, including interpretation of air photographs, topographic and geological maps, and field walking.

- **high ground** 250m contour was approximate upper limit of most of the ground enclosed by head dykes; may indicate the highest level at which crops could be grown; difficult to navigate on dark nights
- **mosses and marshes** shown on the map as mires and hill peat, most lie above 250m contour; it is likely that there were other areas of peat - a hazard to anyone on horseback; almost all of the north west area is now forest; many other areas will now have been drained
- **little brooks and runnels** flow in steep-sided gullies that are still heavily overgrown; in summer almost impassable on foot and would always have been impenetrable on horseback; some formed boundaries between land holdings; good sources of timber for firewood, building and other purposes



Sandstone crags in Taret

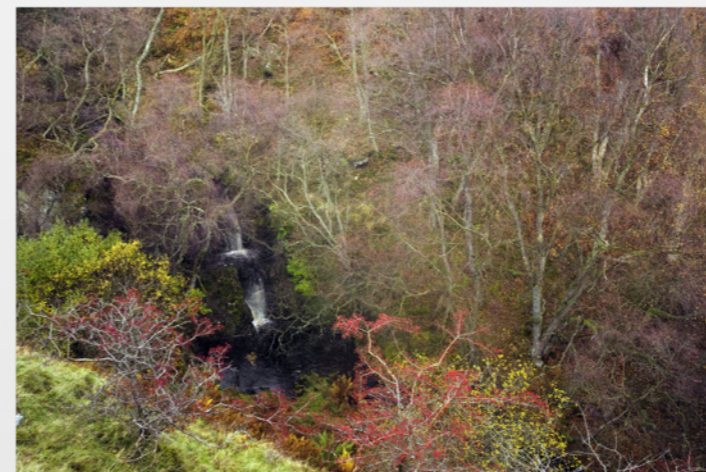
- **sandstone crags** important features of the terrain: some at 0.5km long created a significant obstacle for invaders; good vantage points from which watches could be kept and warning beacons lit (two crags in the Taret area are still called 'Watch Crag'); provided stone for bastle construction
- **flood plains and river terraces** most of Taret's bastles are set well back from rivers and burns on bluffs and terraces, often a few hundred metres from the water and 20-30m higher; one or two in the upper Taret area are sited closer to burn level



Land above 250m foreground wall with remains of Hollinhead, highest of Taret bastles; ground beyond was enclosed; head dyke visible in middle distance



'mosses and marshes' the hazardous Border Mires



'little brooks and runnels' -- 'banks and cloughs of wood' impassable vegetation at the Thorney Burn in autumn



Floodplains and river terraces Snabdaugh bastle, on left, was built on a prominent river terrace; floodplain in foreground and on right